

BREAKING DOWN SILOS YUMA



Written by Elizabeth Burden, Southwest Folklife Alliance

When you're a border county perceived as "a gas station on the way to San Diego," it can be difficult to have a sense of community. Individual, families, informal groups, and organizations feel isolated by the geographic distance, cultural and demographic differences, and the current political environment.

The goal of the Yuma team of the Arizona Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) was to break down these silos. Team members Abraham Andrade, Lindsay Benacka, Isaac Russell, and Ann Wilkinson envisioned a project that would use the arts to connect the diverse parts of Yuma county. "We're a community-based, ultra-participatory mural project," said Benacka. "The murals are pre-designed, but the community is invited to come and paint a little sliver of the bigger picture."

The day I met with the team was a warm fall day in Yuma. The latest mural project was underway outdoors at Arizona Western College (AWC). Throughout the day, a steady flow of community members showed up to paint—students, faculty members, neighbors, plus individuals and families with young children and teenagers who had no connection to AWC and who did not live in the immediate area. Each person was assigned a square to paint, given a color print out of what the square was to look like, and handed brushes and paint. Whatever happened in that square was up to them.

The trust in the people and the process was refined across the two years of the CCI grant. At first, team members had to do some talking to convince passers-by and looky-loos that yes, they could paint—and that this project was worth getting involved in. That changed over time. "Once the ball got rolling, it created its own

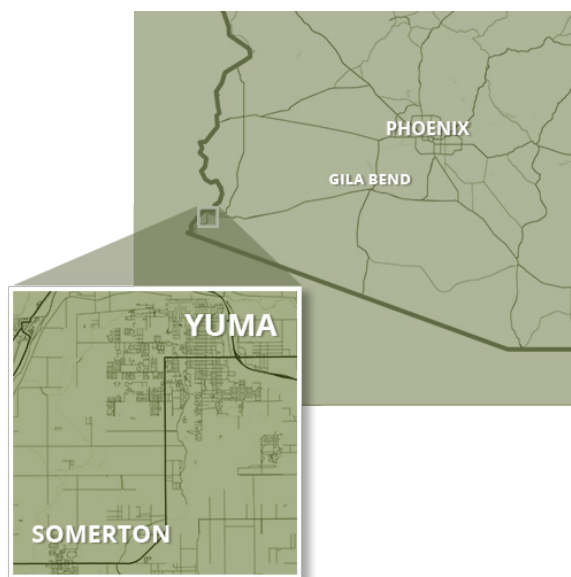


Photo: DIY Murals project in process at the Big Curve Lowe's location. Photograph by Lindsay Banacka.

momentum,” said Russell. “When we were staffing the first three original sites, you might not see anybody for 30 minutes, 45 minutes. Then it [became] like a rainstorm; the smattering turned into a downpour. We had a time when we didn’t have enough brushes. People had to wait to continue working.”

The painters took joy and pride in completing their tasks, which they took seriously. They asked questions to ensure the colors they were using were the correct ones, and that their painted square appropriately connected with the surrounding ones. “Everyone’s been like, ‘OK, I understand this is some bigger picture. I don’t know what it is, but I will do my part to make it happen,’” Benacka reflected. “I think that’s been a beautiful undertaking, people working together on the same square, cleaning up another square now that it makes more sense, now that you know these lines connect, like ‘OK, let’s try to figure it out.’ I mean, they’re pretty self-sufficient. We could be standing up there guiding them, but they’re also figuring it out, and it will be okay. No matter what they do, it’s going to be beautiful.”



*Photo: DIY Murals project in process.
Photograph by Lindsay Banacka.*

All-in-all, seven completed murals are spread across the county, designed by artists and painted by the community. The first three are strategically located in east Yuma County, in south county near the border with Mexico, and “right in the middle.” The other four murals fill in the space in between. Their placement in a park, beside a busy roadway, and on public buildings has transformed underused or underappreciated places into spaces that community members are now proud of.

To team members, the process of creating the murals has been as important as the lasting artworks that have been produced. “I think our project is really designed for process, that it doesn’t even really matter what [the community members are] painting as long as they’re painting together,” said Benacka.

The process has had several intangible yet indelible impacts on the project team, community participants, and on the community as a whole. “It drew people from all over the county to different neighborhoods in different parts of the county,” shared Russell. “I think beyond the art, it’s opened up a sense of broader belonging. We

learned that people want to belong and be a part of something bigger than themselves.”

Wilkinson echoed the importance of the process of painting the murals providing opportunities for belonging. “The very first mural that I was engaged in was out in the foothills,” said Wilkinson. “There was a woman who was wearing silk clothing and pearls, and she was so anxious to have a chance to be part of the neighborhood that she was like, ‘That’s okay if I get paint on them. I just want to be involved.’”

Benacka added, “There were families that [came out] to paint together. I think it builds family pride. Every time they walk past that mural now it’s, ‘Hey remember when we did that together?’ They’re not staring at screens; they’re engaging in space in a different way.”

Wilkinson commented that the process also gave people opportunities to explore different parts of the county. “When we were working on the project over at Roxaboxen [park] painting the murals over there, there were people who had never been to the park who had come for the first time because they wanted to be part of this mural that they’d heard about,” she said. “I had a young dad come up to me and say, ‘I’ve just been told there’s a book about this.’ He came back the next day with his daughter. They had gone to the bookstore, bought the book and,

you know, they were learning more about Yuma because they got their toe in the water from doing the mural.” Andrade noted that people who are not usually involved or invited to participate will do so when given the opportunity; many are no longer hesitant now that they see themselves represented in the work. “My aunt was part of the San Luis project, and she didn’t see the whole piece together until it was done,” said Andrade. “She painted a couple of squares. And she felt really, really represented. She was a field worker, she worked [in] agriculture most of her life. Just being part of that project and seeing that the mural represented her was really important.”

The project also has led to a change in community members’ perspectives about how and whether they can participate in civic projects. Team members noted that there has been a resurgence in the desire to take care of the aesthetics of the community—and an increased sense of ownership of the public art and spaces.

The finished murals are both a visual representation of the community itself and emblematic of the community working together. “It is symbolic of the fact that we all make up a piece of the community picture,” said Benacka. One young community member chimed in to share her thoughts about the mural on which she worked. “I don’t feel like I made it,” she said. “I feel like I helped. I think it’s cooler that I’m like, ‘Hey, I participated and we made it together.’ That’s the whole point, right?”

The team members nodded in agreement.



DIY Murals project in process at the Foothills Library with help from the City of Yuma’s Circle of Friends and Special Olympics Team. Photograph by Judy Phillips.